How Do They Deal with Speaking Anxiety? EFL Learners' Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Emotion promotes various consequences on language learning (Maquidato, 2021). It includes language anxiety. (Brown 2000) defined language anxiety as the "state of mind connected with uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, or worry". The study aims to investigate how students deal with the condition. This is a qualitative study employing a case study design. I involved twenty university students majoring in English Education as participants. I selected them purposively based on the anxiety symptoms they showed in the observation. Data were obtained through three stages consisting of observation, as I mentioned earlier, focus group discussion, and interviews. After collecting data through the abovementioned procedures, they were analyzed through some stages: data coding, reduction, and grouping. I then compared the findings with earlier findings or theories to get a valid conclusion. Based on the findings and discussion above, I concluded five strategies implemented by EFL learners in coping with speaking anxiety. They are to think positively, start a conversation with a more common topic, shift the communication to a written form, and understand the speaking topic well. Further research should investigate those strategies quantitatively to measure their effectiveness levels.

Keywords: Foreign Language Anxiety, Coping Strategies, EFL

INTRODUCTION

Emotion promotes various consequences on language learning (Maquidato, 2021). It includes language anxiety. (Brown 2000) defined language anxiety as the "state of mind connected with uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, or worry". Ehrman (Macintyre & Gregersen, 2012) stated that language anxiety possibly positively and negatively contributes to language learning. The present study focuses on the latter aspect.

Numerous studies have proven that the condition disadvantages the second language learning outcome, especially in English-speaking classes (e.g., Idrus 2022, Dewaele 2002; Guntzviller, Yale, and Jensen 2016. The negative impact of language anxiety is when it acts as an affective filter hypothesis. When second language learners' anxiety is high, their affective filter is raised, and they become less able to process language input, fail to take in the available target language messages, and do not progress in their language acquisition (Henter, 2014). She noted that language learners with high anxiety levels tend to be self-conscious,

have difficulty concentrating, fear making mistakes, avoid communicative situations, study for extended periods, become forgetful, and even experience a mental blockage. From that explanation, the affective filter should be reduced in the language learning process in order to minimize the possibility of failure or not achieving the maximum language learning output.

During my teaching journey since 2007, anxiety is never absent in English-speaking classes. Interestingly, it affects both low and high-level learners who are also supported by Idrus (2022). When this study was carried out, I taught eight-semester university students majoring in English Education. In general, they showed a great performance in writing but not in speaking, while both aspects are productive skills that ideally could equally assess the learners' target language output.

Most research on language anxiety focuses on factors promoting it. Thus, the primary purpose of this research is to investigate how students deal with the condition. The findings will be crucial to give insight to both teachers on how they might provide suggestions or threats to their learners and to students on how they could deal when confronted with a similar condition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies have consistently concluded that foreign language learning is a complex process that does not only involve the mastery of linguistic components (e.g., vocabulary, grammar) but also socio-contextual aspects (Möller, 2020) and affective factors (Henter, 2014). The most substantial variable of the latter component is anxiety (Henter, 2014).

Foreign language anxiety is academically defined as a feeling of worry or tension specific to producing (speaking or writing) or receiving (listening or reading) information in a second language context (Dewaele, 2017). It is a contemptuous condition on self-related cognitions, feelings of apprehension, and psychological responses (Macintyre & Gregersen, 2012).

It has been generally accepted that foreign language anxiety has some different features from general communication anxiety. For example, (Dewaele, 2017) stated that it is a "distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behavior arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process." Furthermore, since foreign language anxiety happens in the interaction between society (learner to learner, learner to teacher), this can be included in social anxiety. Social anxiety refers to the insecurity toward the possible evaluation by others (Blöte et al., 2009).

While some researchers argue that anxiety in L2 leads to poor performance, in some other studies, it was suggested that poor performance promotes anxiety. For example, (Wijaya, 2022) discovered that speaking in the target language learning produces anxiety in his students. On the other hand, some studies proved that

anxiety is a crucial factor affecting second language development (e.g. Spielmann and Radnofsky, 2001). They found that anxiety makes poor performance in his study of language training. In other research, it is stated that anxiety about learning a foreign language is cyclical (Macintyre & Gregersen, 2012) or produces a down-spiraling effect (Arnold & Brown, 1999). They stated that when anxiety occurs, the speaker may produce an error, and because of the error, they become more anxious, in which resulting a worse performance.

Trait, state, and situation-specific anxiety

The early study of anxiety tends to conceptualize it as a uniform, universal construct (Edelmann, 1981). However, the later scholars (e.g. (Spielberger & Sydeman, 1994) divided it into trait and state categories. Spielberger and Sydeman (1994) defined state anxiety as "fear, nervousness, discomfort, and the arousal of the autonomic nervous system induced temporarily by situations perceived as dangerous". On the other hand, trait anxiety is referred to as "a relatively enduring disposition to feel stress, worry, and discomfort" (Spielberger & Sydeman, 1994). Ideally, anxiety decreased over time (Oxford, 1999), but in fact, some studies found that some students did not have their anxiety decreasing after some periods of studying (e.g. Desrochers and Gardner, 1981). Therefore, the second language anxiety perceived by Indonesian students in the international classroom context can be categorized as trait anxiety. Although many scholars refer to this anxiety as a new category (situation-specific anxiety) because it commonly occurs in second-language classroom training only (e.g., Rose, 2009; Horwitz, 2001), it should be an exception for the anxiety which is experienced not in such context. Referring second language anxiety to trait anxiety here means a student may feel anxious about using English wherever she/he is.

Facilitating / debilitating anxiety

While facilitating anxiety positively affects second language learning, negative anxiety is a barrier in foreign language study. In the study of foreign language anxiety, whether anxiety facilitates or debilitates foreign language learning, the study resulted in varied findings. Some researchers (e.g., Liu, 2007 found that anxiety supports foreign language proficiency. He found that students who experienced a high level of anxiety tried to use English structure correctly more frequently than their native language peers. However, other studies (Chen and Chang, 2004 and Pappamihiel, 2002) confirmed that it could inhibit second language acquisition. Similarly, it was stated by (Smith, Sarason, and Sarason, 1982) that a low degree of anxiety would result in low performance, and on the contrary, when the anxiety increases too high, it could damage a performance.

Previous findings related to speaking anxiety coping strategies

Library research carried out by (Wijaya, 2022) found that the most common strategies to reduce FL speaking anxiety are "(1) The internalization of more innovative L2 speaking learning activities and (2) The existence of more enjoyable L2 speaking learning circumstances". However, these findings seem to

only apply to EFL teachers rather than students. Therefore, the findings are likely not relevant to the current study.

On the other hand, (Marwan, 2007) quantitatively investigated strategies implemented by FL learners in coping with foreign language anxiety. He involved two groups of learners, lower intermediate and upper intermediate, based on the TOEFL scores (475 or less and 476 or higher, respectively). Some coping strategies he developed in the questionnaire included preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer seeking, and resignation. Based on the questionnaire, he concluded that lower intermediate students more generally implement preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, and peer seeking when dealing with language anxiety. On the other hand, upper intermediate students tend to do peer seeking as the most frequent coping strategy, followed by positive thinking, relaxation, and preparation. In the present study, we tried to explore if all or some of the strategies were also implemented by respondents when they were in a similar state.

Previous Related Study

The present study is relevant to the findings of (Idrus, 2022) regarding internal and external factors promoting speaking anxiety among Indonesian students and aspects raising speaking anxiety in an EFL class in West Papua (Idrus et al., 2022). Currently, we are seeking how students deal with English-speaking anxiety in a situation triggered by factors mentioned in earlier studies.

METHOD

Design and Samples

This is a qualitative study employing a case study design. I involved twenty university students majoring in English Education as participants. I selected them purposively based on the anxiety symptoms they showed in the observation.

Instrument and Procedure

Data were obtained through three stages consisting of observation, as I mentioned earlier, focus group discussion, and interviews.

In the observation, I used a data checklist describing someone experiencing speaking anxiety based on earlier literature (Idrus, 2022) to identify which students' experienced the disorder. Besides that, the data checklist also contains some strategies to cope with speaking anxiety according to previous research or book recommendations. I also provided a column to record some characteristics students showed that were not existing on the data checklist.

Then, before carrying out a focus group discussion, I prepared a list of prompt questions to facilitate respondents in delivering their experiences or thoughts related to speaking anxiety.

Lastly, the interviews aimed to explore students' ideas and experiences related to the strategies they implemented when in an anxious state. Therefore, before interviewing students, I prepared a set of questions related to interesting data related to each of them that I found in observation and focus group discussion that need to explore further through the interview. The interview was carried out semi-structurally to allow me to prompt wider questions to get more comprehensive data.

Data Analysis

After collecting data through the procedures mentioned above, they were analyzed through some stages, namely data coding, data reduction, and data grouping. The findings we then compared and contrasted with earlier findings or theories to get a valid conclusion.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the experiences shown or mentioned by the respondents, either through observation, FGD, or interviews, there were some strategies they applied when facing a condition that threatened their anxiety to speak. Data we gathered from those three stages are presented below using pseudonyms.

1. To think positively

During the FGD, Dee seemed the most convenient student to speak with among other participants based on the way he told his experience in speaking in the classroom. For example,

> *"I feel comfortable speaking to everyone because I think that it is a chance for me to train my language. So, if you ask me whether I feel comfortable or not, I always feel comfortable talking with my friends." (Dee)*

From this statement, it can be identified that perceiving the speaking activity as a chance to train his language skill is the key to the success of Dee to get off from the anxiety in speaking. By that, one should tolerate any weakness they may face or produce when speaking. Therefore, presumably, when other students stick this belief in their minds, they will probably be able to deal with their anxiety about speaking. However, they have a low listening skills, feel their positive face is being threatened, have perfectionism, or tend to negatively perceive their ability.

(Maharani 2021 and Kondo and Yang, 2004) in (Hidayoza, Amri, and Wahyuni 2019) also found that some EFL students coped with speaking anxiety by thinking positively about the benefits of the challenges they face.

2. Start a conversation with a more common topic.

It has been discussed previously that there are some occasions in which the learners feel hesitant to speak because they believe that they are still unable to cope well with the material. The strategy Luna usually uses to reduce the anxiety she may face when speaking with her friend is avoiding a direct conversation related to the subject and starting the conversation with a simpler topic.

> *"I make a chit-chat first, for example, "Have you done your homework?" I choose a question, and from that, I talk about a particular topic. So, for example, because it is a simple question, so I do not need to plan it in my head. ... Sometimes I ask, 'How are your exams? Are you going bla bla bla? or "Which questions do you choose?" Like that. So it is getting simple. Actually, I did not know it at first, but from that, we start to talk more deeply. "Do you talk about this? But I think, yesterday, it was ..."..." (Luna)*

By starting a conversation with a simpler topic experienced by Luna could reduce her anxiety about speaking with her classmates. It seems after feeling successful with the former conversation, her confidence in speaking is built. Therefore, she is brave to continue the talk with a more complex topic, e.g., a topic related to her subject material. It confirms the finding of (He 2017), which suggested doing relaxation exercises to minimize the fear of speaking.

3. Shifting the Communication to a Written Form

From the information from some scripts provided before, it can be identified that Diana seems to have great anxiety regarding speaking in the classroom. Besides the conditions presented in the previous parts, she also mentioned that she usually gets anxious to ask the lecturer question. Therefore, if something crucial is to clarify, rather than asking the lecturer in person, she prefers to email the questions.

> *"I asked, "If I don't understand, can I send you an email?". (The lecturer said) "Of course!" I prefer to type because I will have more time to think, rather than orally " (Diana)*

The present finding mirrors the strategy identified by (Maquidato, 2021) about dealing the L2 Speaking anxiety by putting their thought into writing. Although enhancing the students' speaking competence seems less beneficial, such a strategy could maintain the quality of the process and the output of the learning activity.

4. Understanding the speaking topic well

It was mentioned before that the student's mastery level of the topic discussed or talked about affects their anxiety. Dee anticipates such a problem in the presentation by reading plenty of information about the topic. Besides enhancing

his fluency, it also supports him to be free from nervous feelings when the lecturer asks questions that he did not expect before.

> *"Yeah, I made some preparation, searching information about the topic that will be discussed. Searching the topic as much as possible." (Dee)*

In the lecturing context, to avoid becoming silent or getting worried about speaking in the group or the whole classroom discussion, Helen ensures that she has read every compulsory reading material before joining the lecture.

> *"The key point is reading the reading materials. As long as we know, the learning system here is 'you have to bring something'. So if, for example, we have read much, we automatically will be confident to share an idea." (Helen)*

By understanding the material well, the students are also able to be faster to deliver their idea, more critical in perceiving the lecture talk, get off from some factors which they believe may threaten their positive face (Idrus, 2022), and enhance their self-perceive. Consequently, they could get more confident in speaking in the classroom, especially in academic conversation/talk.

While the study carried out by (Netta, Trisnawati, and Helmanda 2020) suggests that students make preparation in terms of language ability, the present findings suggest that students prepare their understanding of the topic to discuss.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion above, I concluded five strategies implemented by EFL learners in coping with speaking anxiety. They are to think positively, start a conversation with a more common topic, shift the communication to a written form, and understand the speaking topic well. Further research should investigate those strategies quantitatively to measure their effectiveness levels.

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